

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 1, 2019

The Honorable Kevin K. McAleenan
Acting Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Acting Secretary McAleenan,

We are writing to ask for your engagement in helping to ensure the successful operation of the new Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (Sea-Tac) International Arrivals Facility (IAF) when it opens in the fall of 2020. We would like to understand how U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) will either provide sufficient staffing to meet projected peak passenger demand or alter the implementation of new systems and processes that have the potential to reduce throughput in the new facility.

International passenger activity requiring customs clearance at Sea-Tac has more than doubled in the past 10 years – driven by economic growth in the Puget Sound region and a significant increase in direct international service. The current 1970's era South Satellite Federal Inspection Services (FIS) area – which is outdated, cramped, and contributes to significant delays in international passenger processing – is seeing peak levels of well over 2,000 passengers per hour in a space designed for only 1,200 per hour.

To address this growing demand, Sea-Tac is currently constructing a new International Arrivals Facility, which includes a 450,000 square foot grand hall for baggage claim and customs processing; an 85-foot high aerial walkway that will directly connect passengers from the South Satellite to the grand hall; and a new sterile corridor connecting arriving international passengers on Concourse A. The IAF project aims to create a world-class, modern facility that will not only meet current and future needs, but also serve as a model for other such facilities at airports throughout the country. The facility is on schedule to open in the third quarter of 2020.

The efficient and timely processing of international passenger arrivals will be critical to the success of the new IAF. For many visitors and business travelers, their arrivals experience at Sea-Tac sets the tone for their time in the United States. Long waits on the plane, in the corridor getting off the plane and in line at customs will not provide the kind of world class customer experience or welcoming tone that Sea-Tac strives to provide – to say nothing of the disruption and economic impact of missed domestic flight connections. This problem will only become more challenging over the next year as Sea-Tac is anticipating a 17% increase in arriving FIS passengers by August 1, 2020, with regular peak periods of 2,600 passengers per hour in the new facility.

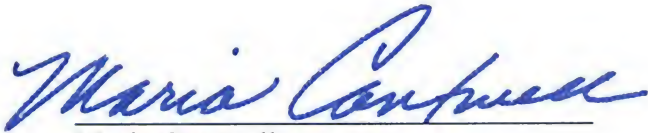
Given this projected growth in advance of the IAF opening, we are concerned about CBP's ability to process arriving international passengers in a timely manner, particularly with the simultaneous introduction of facial recognition technology, the removal of Automated Passport

Control (APC) kiosks, and the new “bags-first” procedure. Sea-Tac will be the first major airport in the country with the combination of these processes.

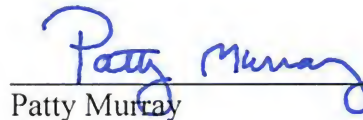
At currently projected staffing levels with these new procedures in place, current modeling by Sea-Tac shows that wait times will be two-to-three-times as long as their goal for passenger processing. While both local and national CBP staff have been actively engaged in discussions about these challenges, we remain concerned that – one year out from the completion of the IAF – there is not a clear plan to ensure an acceptable international arrivals experience. We therefore request that you provide us with a detailed strategy to ensure reasonable passenger processing times at the IAF – either by growing staffing levels to meet demand or by phasing in implementation of facial recognition, APC kiosk removal, and bags-first to compensate for low staffing and high demand.

Thank you in advance for your responsiveness to this request, and we look forward to working with you toward the successful opening and operation of the new International Arrivals Facility at Sea-Tac.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Maria Cantwell", written over a horizontal line.

Maria Cantwell
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Patty Murray", written over a horizontal line.

Patty Murray
United States Senator